

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2021 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven Asian and Asian American musicians. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of Yuki Yasuda

Yuki Yasuda is a renowned koto player based in Torrance, California. Born in Japan, Yasuda began learning to play the Japanese koto at the age of 12. She then majored in Japanese koto music at Takasaki Junior Arts College and received rigorous Japanese koto instruction under the tutelage of modern Japanese koto music masters Tadao Sawai and Kazue Sawai. Yuki graduated from NHK's traditional Japanese music school. She then moved to Los Angeles, California to teach Japanese koto before launching a contemporary music band, "Ten," with her husband.

Oral History Interview Transcript – Yuki Yasuda

CM- I am Cole McQuinn joined with Nancy Xu and Matt Hansen, and we are interviewing Yuki Yasuda tonight. It is 7:02pm on November 23 Tuesday, November 23. We are all in Los Angeles California and Yuki Yasuda is in Torrance California, and this interview will be conducted over Zoom. Wonderful so thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us tonight. First question for you is just we'd like you to describe your upbringing a little bit and then how did you start playing the Koto

YY- I was born in Japan.

I started playing the koto in junior high school club activities.

Usually, professional koto players' parents are koto teachers and performers but my parents are not musicians. My father is police and my mother is housewife, so nobody plays the koto.

Also, professional koto players usually start playing the koto at the young age of three or four, but I started playing the koto a little late at the age of twelve, so I'm a little bit different from them which is kind of rare.

When I started playing the koto, I came across Tadao Sawai's koto music. Let me introduce Tadao Sawai. Tadao Sawai is one of the great koto masters and composers, and he founded Sawai Koto School. He was born in Aichi Prefecture in 1937. His father was a shakuhachi performer. The shakuhachi is a Japanese traditional bamboo flute.

From his student days at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, Tadao Sawai received media attention as a new young koto player, because he is so talented. Many koto players wanted to learn from him. So, he began to teach the koto and founded Sawai Koto School. He left ninety compositions and more than one hundred CDs in his career. His compositions are among the most widely performed in the koto world.

So, I've been playing the koto for 30 years. I wouldn't have been playing the koto for such a long time without Tadao Sawai's music because I was fascinated by his music. His music grabbed my heart. While everyone in young age enjoyed listening to pop songs but I was crazy about the koto. There were few kids around me playing the koto, and I think I was a little strange kid.

And then, I wanted to be an apprentice of Tadao Sawai, so, I started to learn koto very hard when I was in high school. I also started taking private Koto Lessons from a teacher at Sawai Koto School. I decided to take the entrance exam for music college, but it was a very difficult day because I was late to start anyway.

Luckily, I was admitted to the Takasaki Junior Arts College majoring in koto music that Tadao Sawai taught there. Tadao Sawai's lessons at college were very tough, but I had a very happy time learning a lot of great things from him.

CM- Awesome, thank you so much. Yeah, so you touched on there a little bit about our experience, not only as a performance but also in your learning experience. Can you talk a little bit about the pedagogical method that you've come from and kind of the difference between the apprenticeships you've done and the more formal academic training you've done?

YY- First, I'd like to talk a little about my background as a koto instructor. I got a koto instructor certificate of Sawai Koto School. The koto instructor exam has a practical skill and a paper test. To pass the exam, we must be able to play the shamisen as well as the koto. The shamisen is a stringed instrument shaped like a guitar. I practiced from morning till night to pass the exam.

Also, after graduating from college, I enrolled in a traditional Japanese music school hosted by the Japanese national broadcasting company NHK. And I had the opportunity to study traditional Japanese musical instruments other than the koto.

When I teach the koto, I try to give a lesson that suits each person, because the shapes of the fingers are all different. Some people bend their fingers, others do not. The thickness and length are also different. Even when playing the same phrase, it's important to find the angle that produces the best sound for that person. Also, when there is a phrase that the student is not good at playing, I will work with the student to find and resolve the cause. I think the role of the teacher is to solve the student's problems, teach them what they don't know yet, and teach them how to improve.

Also, let me talk about my personal experience as an "uchideshi." The uchideshi means live-in apprentice. It is a special system of education methods for traditional Japanese performing arts. In order to learn the traditional Japanese performing arts from the master, it is a system that receives direct guidance while helping the master's work and taking care of them.

After graduating from the college, I was planning to become an uchideshi of Tadao Sawai. Unfortunately, Tadao Sawai died from of illness at the young age of fifty-nine years old in the year I was supposed to be an uchideshi. I'm so sad and I've been trying hard to become an uchideshi of Tadao Sawai, so I didn't know what to do in the future. At that time, Kazue Sawai, a

koto master who is Tadao Sawai's wife welcomed me as an uchideshi of her. The koto master, Kazue Sawai is worldwide musician and one of the pioneers of contemporary Japanese music. At the age of eight she began studying from Michio Miyagi, who is a legend/famous koto master/composer and she graduated from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. When I became an uchideshi, three or four young koto players became uchideshi together. Among them were the daughters and sons of “iemoto,” too. The “iemoto” is each koto schools head.

Actually, the “iemoto” is one of a Japanese traditional system, not only koto school system but also other traditional Japanese performing arts system.

For example, Kabuki/Japanese classical drama, tea ceremony, 華道/Japanese traditional art of flower arrangement, it has each “iemoto” system, too. Iemoto take over Japan's traditional cultures.

So, some uchideshi were planning to become iemoto, heads of each koto schools in the future. They were studying Sawai's koto music as uchideshi in preparation for that. The uchideshi live in the teacher's house, start with the morning meal preparation, clean up, and prepare for the master's lessons. The master, Kazue Sawai's lesson schedule was always fully booked from morning to night. Uchideshi was usually the last lesson of the day, so we often took the lessons at midnight. When the master has performances and recordings, uchideshi should prepare the instruments, drive to the venue, and help the stage. We were able to learn everything from the practical work required at performances and recordings.

MH- Amazing very, very cool. So I know that you touched on a little bit about how you were just fascinated with Tadao Sawai, and how you felt his style just in your heart. And as a Sawai koto player were there any different or unique ways that you were taught compared to different schools? If there's any kind of like distinction there.

YY- The Sawai koto school was founded about 40 years ago.

There are so many branches not only in Japan but also in the world.

With the passing of Tadao Sawai, the Sawai Koto School take over his great energy and spirit, and the school continues to expand throughout Japan and abroad today.

Compared to other schools, Sawai koto school uses thicker koto picks, thicker strings, and stronger strings tension. Because, Sawai Koto School's founders, Tadao Sawai and Kazue Sawai, thought that in order to play with beautiful sounds, it was first necessary to produce powerful sounds.

Sometimes we wasn't allowed to practice whole songs, we were required to repeat only the basic practice to make a good sound. We kept on practicing it over and over again. Only after the beautiful sound comes out, we can practice whole songs. Then, we played forte/loud sound from the beginning to the end of the song/whole songs and we practiced to make a loud sound anyway.

Finally, we practiced making a quiet sound using the tip of the koto picks while maintaining the same strength as loud sound. With these methods and training, we can make a powerful sound from this long and big instrument and we can resonate the sound of this instrument.

NX- Hi miss Yuki, thank you so much for being here today. So for my question, I'm gonna ask how do you feel about modern Japanese koto music like today? Do you think it keeps the Japanese tradition or is more Westernized?

YY- It's a little disappointing, but Japanese people tend to think that classical koto music are boring. They will prefer modern songs and arrangements of famous popular songs. And it is very interesting that many American koto players, including my students, are interested in classical koto music. I am very happy that they are so interested in Japanese culture.

I used to do that too, koto player who like modern koto music will gradually become interested in classical koto music too. Because, modern koto music is not created suddenly, but is based on classical koto music. In the extreme, we can't play or compose modern koto music correctly without studying classical koto music. In that sense, I think classical koto music will be taken over.

NX- Thank you so much, and there's another question. What do you think koto means to you, and can you please explain it?

YY- This is a very good question, but it's very difficult to explain it. The koto is my life. As you know, life has good and bad things. Life has a lot of ups and downs. I learned a lot of important things in life through the koto. Like this Covid, sometimes there will be hard times. At that time, the koto gives me a lot of my emotional/spiritual support.

And the koto is a very simple instrument with strings stretched on a wooden board. Therefore, the sound of the koto often reflects the character/personality of the performer. The koto is very important to me, because I can express myself through this instrument. And also, I can look back at myself by playing the koto.

Kazue Sawai sometimes went to teach children at elementary school, and I attended school performances with some members. At that time, we always played a song called “Homura” composed by Tadao Sawai. I love the song so much and this song is one of the songs I'd like everyone to listen it.

The “Homura” is a bass koto concerto with five-part koto ensemble. I have already explained the bass koto at the lecture at UCLA the other day, I think you have already known that. It has seventeen strings, and it has a deeper/lower sound. The bass koto was invented by koto master, Michio Miyagi. At first, the bass koto was just an instrument that accompanies the koto, but now it has evolved into a solo instrument. The Homura is one of them.

The “Homura” means Bursting into Flames. Not only does it sound beautiful, but it also sometimes scraping the strings and hits the strings to make noise. That is the specialty of this song and the most notable point. After the children listened to this song at the school

performance, Kazue Sawai told them to find a burning passion in their own hearts. For me, Homura, burning passion is koto music and Sawai's spirits. I hope this is the answer to this question ...

MH- Perfect, perfect, thank you. I kind of wanted to touch back to kind of your own personal style of how you play the Koto and I think my question would be how would you describe your own personal style of koto playing? Do you emphasize certain moments or notes during a piece, and like, how do you like, to make each piece your own? And I know that you talked a lot about Tadao Sawai and how he has influenced that that kind of playing, are there any ways that you kind of break the mold from that?

YY- I try to perform as much as possible in the spirit of the Sawai Koto School. Koto players from Sawai Koto School have fascinated the audience with their dynamic and powerful performance.

The most important thing for me is the sound that comes out when I pluck/strike strings. In Japan, there is a saying “琴線に触れる (Kinsen ni hureru).” Translated it directly, it means “touching the strings of the koto,” which is expressed touching someone's heartstrings and giving them emotion/impression. I think it is important how I can make sounds that reach people's heartstrings.

Let me tell you from my personal experience. I performed as a member of Kazue Sawai Koto Ensemble in Japan and abroad. I had toured in Argentina and Honduras as a member of the ensemble. Also, that was my first experience performing abroad and the first time I've been outside of Japan. I will never forget that audience who didn't know the koto at all but they listened to our performance to the end, and we received a lot of applause. It's my starting point.

Also, I try to play carefully, listen carefully, between each note and between phrase. This is a very Japanese idea, thinking, but I think this soundless time is important. If I play with this in mind, the music will be even better.

NX- Thank you for sharing, like all your experience, and I have my last question for you. So do you mind telling us what kind of music will you play in the future, like will you go back to Japan and develop or continue to teach and promote koto in the United States?

YY- I have had a lot of experience in Japan. I belonged to several koto ensembles, collaborated with non-koto instruments, performed in Japan and around the world, in Argentina, Honduras, India, Malaysia, Thailand, Germany, and Canada. And worked on TV shows, recordings, teaching/lectures, and so on. So, I'm very happy with it.

And in the United States, I had the opportunity to work with the new music composers. They composed several koto concertos and I performed as a koto soloist with orchestra. I also joined the New York-based taiko group as a koto player and toured the United States and Russia. I was able to get a Green Card/permanent residency status as a koto player. I really appreciate it. So I'd like to give back to the United States with music.

As one of them, I've created a "Japanese Traditional Music" website, which introduces Japanese musical instrument players living in the United States. The purpose is to provide musicians with lessons and performance opportunities, and to provide useful information for those who are interested in Japanese music. I hope this website will help the Japanese traditional music community in the United States.

And also, I want to focus more on teaching the koto. I realized that there were already Sawai Koto school teachers in big cities such as New York, San Francisco, Hawaii, Oregon, and Chicago but for some reason there were no Sawai Koto school teacher in Los Angeles. That's why, I want to spread Tadao Sawai's koto music here in Los Angeles. Also, I founded the LA Koto Ensemble. The members are my students. I want to perform with them in many places and let them enjoy the music. And I want a lot of people to listen to the koto music.

NX- So I listened to you and your husband's band on the internet, and you guys are playing excellent modern music. So the question is, what made you decide to play modern music with koto?

YY- Originally, my husband was a member of a rock band and wanted to create a unique band that added traditional Japanese musical instruments to the usual vocal, guitar, bass and drums forms. So, they added koto, shakuhachi/Japanese bamboo flute, and Japanese taiko drums to the band. They searched for musicians on the internet and by chance I was chosen as a koto player.

After that, my husband tried to make it as simple as possible. And then, it became a simple band with only koto, bass and drums. Our band is called Ten. I hadn't listened to rock music so much until then. But I liked the music of Hikaru Sawai who is Tadao and Kazue Sawai's son, and I've played his music a lot.

Hikaru Sawai has a very unique career, and although his father and mother was great koto masters, he was active as a musician in a metal rock band. But, he got his genes of his great parents, he is a gifted koto player. He demonstrated his talent for the koto, and composed many koto music. After the passing of Tadao Sawai, he has been Head of the Sawai Koto School.

I like Hikaru Sawai's music and played a lot, so, playing with a rock band was not too uncomfortable. Because Hikaru Sawai's music have a rock element, as I said before, I didn't listen to rock music so much, but unknowingly I played rock phrases in his music.

What was hard for the band was the fact that it was always difficult to balance the sound because koto's sound is too quiet, smaller than other instruments. Of course I also used microphones but I always had a hard time making sounds for the koto. For that reason, koto, bass, and drums may have been more suitable for me. We played in various places in this band. Sometimes, instead of ordinary drums, we played with Japanese taiko drums player and African drums player. By doing so, we were always able to discover new things, even if they were the same songs. Also, when I started the koto rock band, this form was rare, but now there are many rock bands with Japanese musical instruments, and it has become very popular now.

CM- Amazing. Thank you so so much for taking the time to chat with us tonight. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording.